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McFarlane spreads blame widely for a policy 'disaster'

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WASHINGTON — "Where did we go wrong?"

Robert C. McFarlane turned again and again to that question in three days of testimony analyzing the Reagan administration's Central America policy.

McFarlane, former White House national security adviser and a key witness at the congressional Iran-contra hearings, said he believed the policy has been — and remains — a "disaster," and tried repeatedly to say why.

He leveled criticism not only at the White House, but at the Pentagon, Congress, the contras and even at the public, which he said was poorly equipped to understand complex foreign policy problems.

Among the reasons he cited for the failure of the policy:

- At the White House, infighting among top policy-makers produced "gridlock," "incoherence" and "paralysis." In six years, the administration has been unable "to define the problem" in Central America and "develop a strategy for dealing with it."

- At the Pentagon, the professional military has not learned the lessons of the Vietnam War — how to respond to guerrilla warfare — which he described as the principal technique for promoting Soviet expansionism.

- In Central America, the Nicaraguan rebels cannot fight and are losing the war. Nor have the contras developed effective political leadership.

- Congress has refused to accept its responsibilities and provide clear policy direction. It has refused to vote "yes" or "no" on American involvement — it has always voted "maybe."

"Many people believe that there is something wrong with the way this country makes foreign policy," McFarlane said in his opening statement Monday. "They probably don't know how wrong."

He said problems arose in 1981 at the very beginning of the administration when Reagan's first secretary of state, Alexander M. Haig Jr., at-

tempted to establish policy-making machinery.

Haig said at the time that he wanted to be the "vicar" of foreign policy, but McFarlane said Haig was unable sell that approach to the White House and that Central America policy languished.

As a direct result, McFarlane said, the CIA moved into the vacuum in December 1981 and produced a program for covert action designed to destabilize the Nicaraguan regime.

McFarlane described that decision as a tragic mistake, because, he said, it could not be kept secret indefinitely and blew up with the disclosure in April 1984 about the mining of Nicaraguan harbors.

In a democratic society, it is impossible for a covert military policy to work, he said — because the public will not buy it. At this point in history, after Vietnam, any administration should know that, McFarlane said.

As McFarlane described it, Central America policy in the Reagan years repeatedly has been a case of actions taken too late.

When he became national security adviser in October 1983, "there was still no real operative analysis of what the policy toward Nicaragua ought to be," McFarlane said.

In 1984, he organized the Kissinger commission to make such a study. But Congress had already become disenchanted with the covert policy in its shock over the secret mining of harbors. And by the time the commission completed the study, Congress had put a \$24 million ceiling on aid to the contras.

When Congress cut off all funds to the contras in October 1984, McFarlane said, neither the CIA nor the Pentagon could act "and the job fell to the NSC staff, an agency of last resort." History has shown, he said, "that it was not the right agency."

By January 1985, McFarlane said, he had become convinced that the contras were not making it and had not demonstrated military capability or political cohesion.

He confirmed that he had been quoted correctly in an interview with the Baltimore Sun a few days ago as describing the contras as "well-meaning, patriotic but inept Coca-Cola bottlers and clerks."

"They are incompetent," he said. "They just cannot hack it on the battlefield."

McFarlane said the contras should be supported, but that this should not be the central element of American policy in Central America.

At one point he said that much stronger diplomatic efforts, and possibly more direct American military involvement, were necessary to find peace in the region.

But no problem, he said, is more serious than the government's policy-making "paralysis." That paralysis, he said, grows from the fact that the secretary of state is not in charge.

Other departments, such as the CIA and the Pentagon, consider themselves "co-equal" and can prevent decisions simply by refusing to attend inter-departmental meetings, he said.

But McFarlane acknowledged under questioning that he, too, had on occasion kept his activities secret from Secretary of State George P. Shultz.

He said, for example, that he did not tell Shultz for more than a year that the administration was secretly obtaining funds from Saudi Arabia to support the contras.